‘Crazy Clown Time’ and David Lynch’s parties

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This essay addresses David Lynch’s transition from feature-length filmmaker to musician by focusing on his first studio album, ‘Crazy Clown Time,’ and in particular the music video he directed for the title track. Through its depiction of a suburban backyard party gone awry, the music video immediately opens onto the party motif found throughout Lynch’s film corpus. By using this link as a point of departure, the essay explores Lynch’s commentary on interpretation, the inseparability of the aural and the visual in his oeuvre and the role of parties and fun throughout his cinema. Lynch’s party scenes offer perhaps the clearest example of what is often called the ‘Lynchian,’ a term that this essay argues complicates rather than condenses Lynch’s signature.

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On 7 November 2011, David Lynch released his first full-length studio album, *Crazy Clown Time*, on the label Sunday Best Recordings. Notwithstanding the presence of producer/engineer/coperformer Dean Hurley and guest vocals from Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs on the opening number, ‘Pinky’s Dream’, *Crazy Clown Time* functions like many of Lynch’s recent projects: it is an expansive authorial vehicle, in which his credits range from the categorically musical (lead vocals, guitar, synthesizer, percussion and the Suzuki Omnichord) to album mixing and artwork. As fans, followers and critics are well aware, there is nothing particularly new in Lynch assuming various, sometimes surprising, creative duties within or without a given project; in many ways his oeuvre can be characterized by this constant movement through different media and his display (or lack) of the skills required. Since an exhaustive list of these assorted commitments and roles could easily fill a book, my focus here will be a single thread of Lynch’s first album, namely the title track and the video he directed for it.[1] Roughly seven minutes long, the music video ‘Crazy Clown Time’ premiered on *Vice* magazine’s *YouTube* channel Noisey on 2 April 2012, depicting what Lynch calls in an interview ‘intense, psychotic backyard craziness, fueled by beer’.[2] Unlike the flickering, formalist, more recent music video he directed for the Nine Inch Nails’ single ‘Came Back Haunted’ in July 2013, ‘Crazy Clown Time’ represents the clearest and most compelling link to date between Lynch’s musical output and his feature-length films; both music videos follow in the wake of numerous video shorts and a cluster of other projects that have filled Lynch’s ten-year hiatus from filmmaking.

At first glance, bridging the gap between 'Crazy Clown Time' and Lynch's film corpus may seem to rest solely on the former's depiction of a party and the frequency of that motif in the latter. I would like to suggest, however, that underneath such an obvious connection resides something more granular and elementary in Lynch's work, and furthermore that these foundational characteristics carry a particular resonance with the reappearance of parties in his films. More specifically, language – or rather the dearth of spoken language and explanation, a type of muteness, one might say – links Lynch's feature-length films and his commentary on his work not only to the party but also to the synchronization of sound and image in 'Crazy Clown Time'. Examples of this reticence from his films are, of course, plentiful: there are characters such as Henry Spencer (Jack Nance) in *Eraserhead* (1977), who are frozen before language, without the words to confront someone or something indescribable or otherworldly; or those such as John Merrick (John Hurt) in *Elephant Man* (1980), whose speech is not just hindered by physical deformity but by the burden of unspeakable trauma; there are also scenes organized around silent performances and the canned noise that fills the interludes – Club Silencio in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and the rabbits of *Inland Empire* (2006), for example. Lynch's films are accented by a lack of speech, an incapacity or a refusal to clarify and establish meaning and causality – a resistance to 'making sense'.

It is this laconicism that *recalls* but does not necessarily mirror Lynch's notoriously concise speaking and writing patterns, seen in interviews and in his book *Catching the Big Fish*.[3] What is not said in Lynch's films, what is left out or open, what is kept secret or inside, unfinished, unknowable or perhaps altogether unutterable, seems to be supported and enacted by Lynch's well-documented commentary of silence and deferral. Yet one certainly does not find in this silence – Lynch's particular silence – a complete rejection of discourse, an absolute 'keeping quiet' or otherwise total absence of language. Alongside the impression of his old-fashioned, good-natured cheeriness one discerns a brutal literalism and directness in Lynch's words, a terseness that signals an aversion to the belaboured processes of prolixity and decryption. His words and phrases seem to dwell on the surface of things, and it is there that they spin around, engendering a lure of depth, defying interpretation in advance. Prior to developing these themes in his book, *David Lynch: The Man from Another Place*, Dennis Lim observed: 'Mr. Lynch could never be accused of overthinking things. Or of overtalking them. In discussions of his work he reverts to stonewalling tactics, deflecting detailed or analytical probes with a knowing vagueness.'[4] Lynch's rigorous anti-hermeneutical method (if this approach can indeed be called a method), which Lim here aligns with 'thinking' and 'talking', may take the shape of silence but it is not soundless, nor is it wordless. 'As soon as you put things in words, no one ever sees the film the same way', says Lynch. 'And that's what I hate, you know. Talking – it's real dangerous.'[5] The danger of (over)talking, of saying too much, is for

Lynch the threat of a final exegesis that would preclude a future unique experience with, or reading of, a given work; such a ‘dangerous’ act – ‘putting things into words’ – would not simply symbolize the end of depth by providing its precise measure or calculation, for ‘talking’ does not constitute a type of surfacing movement, a solution to a puzzle or an absolute revelation. Rather, explanation in this sense catastrophically flattens and therefore annihilates the surface/depth dichotomy altogether. In *opposition*, and as this analysis weaves through ‘Crazy Clown Time’ and the party scenes that precede it, Lynch’s work is distinguished by the exacerbation of, and resulting discourse on, dichotomies and oppositionality – the refusal, in other words, to talk (too much).

My response to this language of silence takes me along three separate but intertwining paths. I consider first the inseparability of the aural and the visual in Lynch’s cinema, which traces a general theory of his creative process as well as conceptions of sound and image; second, the ‘matching’ lyrics and images of ‘Crazy Clown Time’; third, the few short flashes and fragments of language that Lynch has used to describe the music video’s main event, the party. Together these approaches reveal the internal conflicts and exclusions at play within the parties and fun of Lynch’s worlds, while developing the tensions of the ubiquitous but slippery term, ‘the Lynchian’. Although conventional usage of this term quickly, and sometimes rather recklessly, names a proximity, affinity or even fusion between the extremely bizarre and the utterly commonplace, the following treatment of ‘Crazy Clown Time’ pursues in its act of listening a turbulence within the Lynchian that reflects Lynch’s literalism and thus his stance against firmly establishing what his films, or any creative work for that matter, properly mean.

In short, the Lynchian is theorized here as a catalyst to remarking the act of grouping and naming; it illustrates the work of an improper name, an act of *proper dispossession*. For if it does anything at all, the Lynchian undoes itself through its doing or being done. It speaks of nothing but incapacity, failure and interminable reverberation; it declares the impossibility of ascribing the ‘-ian’ suffix to someone or something without leakage or misappropriation.[6] Like the severed ear in *Blue Velvet* (1986) and Laura Palmer’s corpse in the television series *Twin Peaks* (USA, 1990–91; UK, 1991–92), the term rebuffs or cannot properly respond to the questions addressed to it. Persisting in abeyance, this *corpus* is practically mute – questions disappear into it as into a detached ear. Occasionally, after swirling around the outer folds of the pinna, fragments of words clump together and ricochet back out into the world, but the language sounds sparse to its interlocutors. The Lynchian says very little. Yet through its silences, this stoicism does nothing *but* speak about speaking and the processes of reception and naming. It announces the essential deferrals in and of language and reference, telling only of waiting for the right words.

Repetitive, syncopated, at once compositionally austere and sonically excessive, the construction and mood of ‘Crazy Clown Time’ immediately conjures some of Lynch’s most notable compositions for film (especially the songs ‘The Pink Room’ and ‘Blue Frank’, performed by Fox Bat Strategy and produced by Lynch for *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* [1992]), as well as a number of other collaborations, beginning with the one he forged with composer Angelo Badalamenti for *Blue Velvet*. These songs share slow, heavy and steady drums, sparse bass lines and dissonant, more improvizational electric guitars filtered through delay, tremolo and reverb pedals that culminate in the American blues-infused seediness so often associated with Lynch’s film worlds. It is as if this musical formula sublimates the darker imagery of Lynch’s cinema into purely aural registers, the visual completely transforming into the sonic. Yet for Lynch, sound does not simply succeed a preexisting filmed image; it is not hastily produced to match or underscore. ‘It is difficult not to notice that the ear and hearing are at the core of Lynch’s cinema’, Michel Chion writes. ‘Even if he made silent films, his films would still be auditory. For Lynch, sound is the very origin of certain images.’[7] Chion’s assessment speaks not only to the images of ears and acts of listening that inhabit these films, but also to Lynch’s affirmation in countless interviews of the centrality of the aural to his creative process, as well as the essential inseparability and interdependence of sound and image.[8]

In an interview for the documentary occasioned by the release of the *Twin Peaks* Definitive Gold Box Edition DVD, *Secrets from Another Place: Creating Twin Peaks* (Charles de Lauzirika, 2007), Badalamenti presents a dramatic account of Lynch’s treatment and conception of sound and image. When asked about their collaboration in writing ‘Laura Palmer’s Theme’ for the television series, Badalamenti says that their scoring process began with Lynch first ‘verbaliz[ing] a mood’, which would then inspire the former’s notes on his Fender Rhodes keyboard. ‘What do you see David? Just talk to me’, Badalamenti recalls asking Lynch. Lynch would respond by conveying little vignettes or mental moving images that crystallized the mood and sound of the scene in development. Invoking the phantoms of silent cinema, Badalamenti played a live accompaniment to Lynch’s description of what the latter *saw* as ‘Laura Palmer’s Theme’: a lightless, cold night in the woods and a young, despondent, lonely girl walking from the forest into the focus field of an imaginary camera. As Lynch spoke of the girl’s haunting, floating approach, and of the nightfall and shaded moonlight that rendered her only partly visible, Badalamenti responded with the low drone of the song’s ominous opening chords. After approving of the notes’ alignment with the first images of his imaginary scene, an increasingly animated Lynch, Badalamenti recalls, informed him of the girl’s gradual approach towards the foreground of his invisible composition, from darkness into light. Lynch’s description led Badalamenti to play the opening swell of a crescendo. This precursor to a musical climax, anticipating the girl’s arrival and complete exposure under

the brightness of key and fill lights, caused Lynch to swiftly divert the movement of the scene. Just as she is about to appear, he tells Badalamenti that he 'sees' the girl vanish like a wraith back into the sycamores, her trauma too great to be fully disclosed, her pain inexpressible. The Fender Rhodes' chords follow suit. In a circular fashion, 'Laura Palmer's Theme' never reaches its expected apex; its buildup recedes to the inaugural refrain, the sound of a half-hidden girl in the woods. Where she was is where she will remain – opaque, unknowable, secret.

On the development of sound in his films, Lynch says,

> *a picture gives you an idea of what sound should go with it. So that's really the place to start. And then, once you start, its action and reaction and you start seeing the picture change because of the sounds you put with it. It's a magical thing.*[9]

Taken together, this quotation and Badalamenti's story suggest that an invisible picture may indeed be Lynch's starting place, but the sound generated by its verbalization provides feedback that changes the picture like an actor's face in a reaction shot. After verbalization and sonarization, the picture as sound folds back into itself, affecting what it simultaneously contains and lacks. Since it is partially soundless, but also conditioned by its own type of aurality from which the eventual song is derived, the original picture is essentially pliable and therefore incomplete. It is not, in other words, an origin. 'I feel the mood of a scene in the music', says Lynch in a 1990 interview, 'and one thing helps the other, and they both just start climbing'.[10] For Lynch this escalation is the aforementioned 'magical thing'; cinema's magic announces itself retrospectively, for it is only *after* replaying a recording of their session of 'Laura Palmer's Theme' and reviewing their audiovisual collaboration that Lynch, Badalamenti remembers, embraced him and exclaimed: 'Angelo, that is Twin Peaks … I see Twin Peaks!'

Through the ear portal, Chion would have us believe, there is an eye. And from the ear to the eye and back again, Lynch's cinema has eyes that hear as they see, and see as they hear. A song in this sense is isolated from the mood of a scene before it formally exists; it is already there in silence for Lynch, audible in secret. Badalamenti's music animates Lynch's secret cinema; sound makes cinema visible: 'that is Twin Peaks … *I see* Twin Peaks'. Existing as itself before it is technically written or played – and even occasionally, as the previous story illustrates, before a scene is staged, lit, rehearsed or photographed – Lynch discovers his secret cinema as it already was, from elsewhere. The feedback produced from the emergence of sound is not secondary in this sense – action and

reaction, sound and image are inherently conflated and therefore undecidable. Sound, as feedback, exists with and *as* an image, and vice versa.[11] It is as if Lynch takes dictation from a secret already written elsewhere. '[T]he ear functions here as a passageway', Chion says about *Blue Velvet*, 'the symbol of communication between two worlds'.[12] Badalamenti translates Lynch's verbalized dictation, and they both subsequently evaluate the sound for its accuracy with what was already there, prior to verbalization: cinema before cinema, audiovisuality discovered elsewhere, a heard vision of the world. Wedded to an image that comprises the 'mood' of a given scene, the music or song exists before itself; it unfolds from incomplete private soundlessness into public audibility. Every source is rendered already partly written for Lynch. Creation is dictation.

As a result, the supposed workflow of what comes first, what follows and what is finally produced – the creative labour necessary for the end result (such as a film or a song) – breaks apart in Lynch's secret cinema of extraction and recombination. Images and sounds are not simply abstractions from an original, complete mood, or a sealed-off internal or private psychological realm; they are not deductions from some phantasmatic whole. Speaking of the inspirations for *Blue Velvet*, Lynch says that the pieces comprising the elements of his films are already present as bits, portions and chunks of the world:

> *I started getting these ideas for it in 1973, but they were just fragments of interesting things. Some fell away, others stayed and began to join up. It all comes in from somewhere else, like I was a radio. But I'm a bad radio, so sometimes the parts don't hook together.*[13]

Incoming 'fragments […] from somewhere else' accumulate to form an 'acti-passive' cinema, a mode of writing (and reading) that broadcasts the reception of alien signals.[14] Cinema comes in from somewhere else for Lynch, and his films relay their circuitry and writing processes back to the world.

Demonstrating these same uncanny characteristics of primary dictation, reception without signal origin and 'acti-passivity', the music video for 'Crazy Clown Time' amplifies Lynch's take on creation through the speech acts of the song's lyrics and the matching images that they simultaneously portray and invent. Here are some lines from the song taken at random from the album insert:

> *Paulie had a red shirt*

> *Susie, she ripped her shirt off completely*
>
> *Buddy screamed so loud an' spit*
>
> *Danny poured the beer all over Sally*
>
> *Timmy jumped all around so high*
>
> *Petey he lit his hair on fire*
>
> *We all ran around the backyard*
>
> *It was 'Crazy Clown Time'*
>
> *'Crazy Clown Time'*
>
> *It was really fun*
>
> *It was real fun*

As most viewers of 'Crazy Clown Time' will quickly notice, what you hear is what you get: Paulie is identified by his red shirt, as are topless Suzy, screaming Buddy, and Petey calmly setting his hair alight. In this regard Lynch's lyrics function as a narration of the diegesis, as if they were a kind of live stage direction or specifically written as the script for the video. 'Crazy Clown Time', the music video, appears to be the immediate audiovisualization of the verbalized mood, a direct rendering of Lynch's primary picture, or perhaps the complete transposition of the primary picture itself.

However, Lynch's presence within the diegesis troubles such a smooth reading. His image is literally broadcast on a small television monitor placed on a patio table between seated Paulie and Petey.[15] Partly hidden behind sunglasses, Lynch's face flashes up in canted angles and blurred compositions on the tiny screen, and shots of the party and its revelers frequently cut to extreme closeups of his televised head (figures 1–3) These quick cuts siphon attention away from the partygoers and insert or assert the director and his words at the centre of things. Through his televised voice, Lynch possesses an unequivocal, even mystical power over his actors. Recalling the Wizard's behind-the-curtain spectacular potency from *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), one of his most recurrent intertextual references, Lynch casts a spell over his characters: they are visibly entranced by the song's rhythm and beat, under the hypnotic suggestion of lyrics (figure 4). 'Crazy Clown Time' is a seance and Lynch is the wizard-medium. He is the ghost that arrives and summons the deleterious effects often associated with television and pop

culture in general (vacuity, fascination, worship, addiction, and so on). As a telephonic or televisual deity, his words are their commands. Lynch is here the (dis)embodiment of what Chion calls the *acousmêtre*, or the omniscient offscreen voice.[16] His is the *voiceover*.

Figs 1–3






View largeDownload slide

Television head: establishing shot to extreme closeup, in Lynch’s music video, ‘Crazy

Clown Time' (2012).

Fig. 4



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Hypnotized (tele-transfixed), in 'Crazy Clown Time' (2012).

In his high-pitched, nasal tone and through his well-known austere idiom, Lynch's lyrics also jeopardize this absolute, transcendental authority with their use of a descriptive past tense, and the first person plural: '*We* all ran around the backyard; it was crazy clown time; it was really fun'. 'Crazy Clown Time' can therefore be read as a kind of reminiscence or testimony. Lynch is not only an author or supreme creative force who stands apart from his work or his world, he is also a participant and a witness. He implicates himself there and then with the revelers; he is embedded with them, perhaps *as* them, as an accomplice. Conveying both the assumed activity of an accessory and the passivity of a witness, Lynch creates a conduit or umbilicus to the events of 'Crazy Clown Time' precisely through his frankness, generating a type of testimonial effect or the appearance of having been there. In short, the brevity, flatness and dispassionate simplicity of Lynch's lyrics complicate the assumptions of mimetic depiction and the signature of the creator. The past intrudes into the present from the account of the witness/participant, and this testimony establishes Lynch's intimate co-conspiracy with the characters, as a character himself; there is no difference between the ostensible creator and his original picture and signals. It is as if through the lyrics and, by extension, through the mouth, these characters, *including* Lynch, have literally spilled out into the world. Everything has been translated and released by a voice that has been hijacked and ventriloquized – a voice that no longer belongs to a proper subject. 'Crazy Clown Time' is

claimed and reclaimed: it belongs to the characters as *their* soundtrack, party anthem and story; they are the authors. Lynch serves as the transmitter-medium with their actions as his signals and words. His sovereign *activity* as telephonic or televisual deity thus assents to a more *passive* form of transcription. Perhaps it is in the place between these two accounts – between Lynch's mystical alchemy as creator and machine-like conveyance as witness/participant – that we experience 'Crazy Clown Time' as the multilayered transpositions and translations of writing in general. Crazy are the intricacies, repetitions without clear origin, supplements and temporal loopings of creation and discovery, invention and duplication. Perhaps this craziness can be called 'clown time'.

When asked by *Interview* magazine about the origins of the title 'Crazy Clown Time', Lynch responded with his usual unassuming coyness: 'The lyrics tell the story of the time … It's a *traditional* backyard story that involves girls and guys and beer.'[17] Who (or what) we may ask would call the events of 'Crazy Clown Time' traditional in the typical sense of the word? If the music video depicts something traditional, what then is Lynch's take on tradition? Lynch's comment presumably acknowledges that many of the music video's visual cues and archetypes will be recognized as a suburban, adolescent backyard party (perhaps of the Southern Californian variety), taken to extremes. There is indeed something eerily familiar about 'Crazy Clown Time' – its setting will be 'normal' for some viewers, yet the diegesis resists normalization because the party for the most part remains completely singular and bizarre, full of niche and/or unimaginable activities, pleasures and desires. In a word, and as one reviewer for *Slate* attempts to make clear, its balance and exhibition of tradition and the traditional is precisely what makes the music video Lynchian:

> *The video is as Lynchian as any of Lynch's movies, and not just in being a little terrifying and not a little bit nonsensical (which it is). As with any powerfully Lynchian piece of work, it takes wholesome-seeming Americana circa the 1950s (here, a backyard barbecue, names like Susie and Danny, and a football player in full uniform) and perverts them until they're discomfiting and downright disturbing (Susie takes her shirt off, Danny lights his hair on fire, and the football player keeps running in place).*[18]

Following this logic, one could say that the Lynchian is the affect associated with the displacement of values. Lynch takes what seems on the surface to be 'wholesome' (the backyard barbecue, all-American names, and so on) and shows it to be internally 'perverted'. This 'disturbing' inversion subsequently provokes 'discomfort' and 'terror'. Pushing this characterization further, Lynch appears to expose the dichotomies in and of

the world that mask or contain the other; the ambivalent presentation of these dichotomies – shock and farce, familiarity and novelty – is what seems to motivate the generally accepted sense of what is Lynchian. This sentiment is supported by Todd McGowan's work on Lynch, and in particular his articulation of the latter's uncanny treatment of normality in his acceptance of, and enthusiasm for, the style, well-worn iconographies and traditions of Hollywood. '[Lynch] reveals the radicality and perversity of the mainstream itself', McGowan argues. 'He is too mainstream for the mainstream […] [he] reveals that the bizarre is not opposed to the normal, but inherent within it.'[19] Taking a none-too-subtle jab at academia, David Foster Wallace echoed McGowan's observations some years before in a piece on 1997's *Lost Highway*:

> *An academic definition of Lynchian might be that the term 'refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter'.*[20]

Although Wallace's glib performance of the academic idiom displays his resistance to what he probably considers its gratuitously complex lexical traditions, it should be noted that both he and McGowan build their descriptions of the Lynchian on two shared words: 'reveal' and 'within'. For both Wallace and McGowan, Lynch uncovers something inside and internal; something is revealed within that should supposedly, and by most accounts, be (kept) outside, like an enemy or a potential intruder. A constitutive contamination, as opposed to an infection or another type of foreign invasion, is what perverts the wholesome in Lynch's worlds. Something *already* inside destabilizes the neat division of internal and external; Lynch reveals the difference in the heart of the same.

These characterizations of the Lynchian circle back to Lynch's use of the word *traditional*, which as Svetlana Boym points out has its roots in the Latin *trāditio*, *-ōnem* and carries with it both a sense of, 'delivery, handing down […] the action of handing over to another' as well as 'giving up, surrender, and betrayal'.[21] Equally resistant to its commonplace meaning is the word *revolution*, which according to Boym 'means both cyclical repetition and the radical break. Hence tradition and revolution incorporate each other and rely on their opposition.'[22] Tradition (often thought of as the uninterrupted continuation of the past) and revolution (the event that usurps and redirects this flow of time towards the predictable) elicit the characteristics of their alleged opposite. Under the pressure of further analysis, tradition and revolution are shown to be codependent terms, each referring to the other through the etymological roots that make their variances possible.

Lynch's take on the traditional can thus be viewed as an exposure of the word's dual meaning. It is an affirmative inheritance of tradition (perhaps a 'traditional' one): the act of successful transmission, of a completed passage of rituals or rules, laws, behaviours and practices, as well as the possibility of this transmission missing its mark and going awry. If the word 'traditional' conventionally speaks to the completed transposition and legitimized reiteration of practices, doxa or institutions, Lynch reminds us through 'Crazy Clown Time' that this understanding is haunted by its other, more sinister or playful side. The rigidity, rigour and ritual normally affiliated with tradition encounters something mischievous from within – a dormant *un*traditionality is excavated by unorthodox methods of reading and writing the tradition.

For McGowan, Lynch paradoxically engenders proximity between his films and spectators, a result that is tethered to the formal transparency associated with the conventions of narrative causality and continuity editing. According to 1970s film theory, especially work invested in the terms developed through Althusser and Lacan, transparency refers to the spectator's disavowal of, or blindness to, the construction of a film, which generates an illusory and insidious propinquity between their bodies and the screen. Transparency also implicitly signals a filmmaker's submission (whether conscious or not) to Hollywood's formal rules and the pantheon of 'great' (usually financially successful and decidedly normative) directors. McGowan argues that Lynch's embrace of transparency contradicts this tradition in a style that differs from that of Jean-Luc Godard and other alternative filmmakers, who strove to draw attention to the supposed 'reality' of transparency's ideological underpinnings through formal opposition. Without mimicry, acquiescence or denunciation, McGowan alleges, Lynch 'revels' in the illusory transparent force afforded by cinema in such a way that oppositions (for example fantasy and reality) are 'sustained' throughout his films as irresolvable.[23] This prolongation or maintenance, in turn, signals that Lynch does not posit or privilege the truth of one over the other. Instead his is a cinema of the mainstream and of tradition that cultivates its festering (and perhaps false) internal antagonisms to such an extent that they no longer seem properly delimitable. While McGowan will rely on Lacanian descriptions of fantasy and desire in his account of Lynch's excessive and uncanny normality, my interest in this traditionality revolves around the ways in which Lynch's formal processes amount to an internal transvaluation – or *deconstruction* – of transparency. Formal alienation, or some other alternative practice (as exemplified by Godard, according to McGowan) that attempts to generate spectator distance from a given work, does not simply expose illusion as an artifice. These formal practices instead retrace and reinforce the opposition between the illusory and the actual by positing the 'truth' of illusion. Lynch, on the other hand, draws on transparency in order to claim that there is no escape from opacity; there are neither comprehensive answers nor truths, only a *mise-en-abyme* of shades, screens and curtains. Delimiting a neat division between the illusory and the actual is not just an

illusion in and of itself, but the very illusion that cinema illuminates. If there is indeed a filmic language, Lynch's idiom speaks with and within it as a cinematic metalanguage of and on tradition. His films 'revel' in the belief that the world invests in the illusory rather than advancing a clear alternative to it.

Observing the abundance of dichotomies that saturate Lynch's films, Akira Mizuta Lippit extends McGowans's analysis by arguing that:

> *[they] are neither halves nor pieces of the same; rather they are proliferations that do not originate in any source. Nor do they converge, ever to form a whole […] They are autonomous, each one its own threshold. What distinguishes Lynch's worlds are their incommensurabilities; the divisions are never dialectical (however symmetrical they might at times appear to be), they can never be reformed, restored, and repaired; they are unwholesome, which is to say they never form wholes or totalities. (They become complete and discrete entities in and of themselves, but they never merge with other worlds to create one set of laws, one unified universe.)*[24]

In Lippit's reading there is no one world posited against another in Lynch's cinema, nor is there any cohesion among the parts; there is no *one* proper world, no world that entirely envelops or opposes the other, no world to be called whole or wholesome. Lynch's 'proliferations' are not stable, self-identifiable entities; they are dissymmetrical (despite their symmetrical appearances) and nondialectical partitions, on the edge of the other, 'each one its own threshold'. Rather than definitive sides, Lynch's worlds function like shards and splinters, as if they were explosive debris and shrapnel without source and terminus. They are the shades of limits, limitations and singularities that do not form wholes by conjoining with each other – 'they are unwholesome'. 'In the place of wholes', writes Lippit, 'are holes'.[25]

Drawing on Lynch's concession in an interview that 'between opposing things […] there's *something* in the middle',[26] Lippit develops the space of this 'something' as a meeting point or interface of holes, 'a threshold between sides, the beginning of one before another, but also a place itself, an interstitial place without place'.[27] On or within this middle ground of the *something* is where Lynch admits that reconciling 'opposing things is the trick […] the middle isn't a compromise, it's, like, the power of both'.[28] Lynch's recourse to this excess, his 'trick' of dealing with opposites, amounts to an insistence on

impurity – his cinema takes or has its place in and on the middle. It inhabits a perverse amalgam of unwholesome centres, a hole or holes. The 'reconciliation' that takes or has its proper place in Lynch's cinema is a nonsynthesized copresence of incomplete and autonomous halves, at once a dismissal of assimilation and clear division. 'Unwholesome', in this sense, signals both a refusal to flatten differences and subsume them into an image or phantasm of the same *and* a parallel rejection of demarcating one world from the other. Difference and tension prevail in Lynch's worlds, difference not only from the same, but the difference at work inside of what is expected to be the same. Without absolute autonomy or identity, Lynch's same is not the same. What seems to encompass the avowed irony, terror, recognition and strange twists on and of normality in his films – that which paradoxically goes by the name 'Lynchian' – is an experience of the fantasy of the same and sameness, as well as the incapacity of the '-ian' suffix to perform its sweeping erasure of difference. Lippit presents Lynch's middle as a composite world, a fluid assemblage that disperses at the same rate that it is arranged; it is a fleeting set of incomplete hollow worlds or orifices that are strung together momentarily by a lynchpin – a cinema of holes.

Lynch in his films unveils a multitude of worlds existing close to or within the next, different worlds that refuse to separate or converge as one, worlds that resist both their own self-identity and their complete absorption into the other. In *The Elephant Man* (1980) John Merrick (John Hurt) bathes in the sun's salubrious white light that saturates the sterilized walls, sheets and gowns at the hospital. Such cleansing Victorian gentility seems a world away from the shadows, dinginess and carnivalesque exploitation of London's back streets, but the Night Porter (Michael Elphick) already inhabits the hospital, stalking the grounds after the lights are turned off and bringing with him Merrick's inescapable circus nightmare (figures 5 and 6). *Blue Velvet* famously begins with dreamy, unhurried shots of Lumberton's idyllic suburbia as Bobby Vinton's song plays in the background, recalling the all-American manicured lawns, white picket fences and obedient familial hierarchies of television programmes such as *Leave It To Beaver* (1957–63). Lynch's camera soon punctures Lumberton's tranquility as it dives not *below* the town's surface but precisely *to* its surfaces, the grounds that support its plastic worlds. On these surfaces one encounters not only the frenzied insects feeding on and crunching weaker, outnumbered prey but also the severed ear that leads to Jeffrey Beaumount's (Kyle MacLachlan) descent into the wickedness of Lincoln Street. By day, Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* is the blonde, virginal homecoming queen. But by night she is every parent's worst nightmare: promiscuous, addicted to drugs and filled with unknowable traumas and unspeakable desires.[29] In *Lost Highway* we are introduced to the dark-haired, demure and mysterious Renee Madison (Patricia Arquette), her impotent husband Fred (Bill Pullman) and their cold, minimalist, midcentury home. After apparently killing Renee, Fred transforms into the young and virile Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty), whose brightly lit life

reverts to disarray and darkness when he meets the blonde but equally mysterious Alice Wakefield (also played by Arquette) and enters her world of filmed sex, violence and deception. In a similar double role, Naomi Watts in *Mulholland Drive* is both the buoyant, painfully chirpy Hollywood neophyte Betty Elms and the thoroughly defeated, heartbroken and vindictively desperate veteran two-bit actress Diane Selwyn. Following Lippit, we might say that Watts's characters negotiate Hollywood's holes. Hollywood itself is a kind of hole: a void or pit (or a vacuum as it is commonly thought), but also a larger opening or crevice that spits out the various holes that populate the world and shape its unwholesome whole (figures 7 and 8).

Figs 5–6



View largeDownload slide

White light cleanses the Elephant Man from the industrial waste below, in *The Elephant*

Man (1980).

Figs 7–8





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Dream and nightmare in *Mulholland Drive* (2001): two possible burrows.

On presenting divisions and sides, Lynch claims that ‘just beneath the surface there’s another world, and still different worlds as you dig deeper. There is goodness in blue skies and flowers, but another force – wild pain and decay – also accompanies everything.’[30] Like the phantom of betrayal in the word ‘tradition’, ‘wild pain and decay’ fester not only underneath the veneers of tranquility for Lynch but along with them – they are accompaniments, each unthinkable in the absence of the other. Cinema is the instrument that gets ‘just beneath the surface’ and unearths other worlds, such as the microscopic

layers explored in the opening of *Blue Velvet*, or the complex infrastructure depicted in Franz Kafka's 1931 short story 'The Burrow'. The endless and intricate network of 'The Burrow' evokes Lynch's take on tradition as a porous, malleable body composed of infinite chambers and cells, a body that, when investigated, dissected or dug into, is shown to lack the assumed organization, closure and identity that justifies it as such. Through one of these surface tunnels, which always signal another surface (and tunnel) to be found, we discover 'Crazy Clown Time' and David Lynch's parties. What appears is not the arrival of the alien or the completely unfamiliar but the improper thresholds that haunt the fantasy of any one 'normal' world.

In Lynch's cinema, parties are melting pots unlike any other; they are figurative cauldrons where the fringes of his film worlds – elements of different layers, sides and margins – interact in shared spaces under the auspices of fun. Parties can be seen to form the patchwork of places comprising Lynch's aforementioned 'middle ground'. His party scenes take or have their place elsewhere, between places. They are marked by intersections, failed connections and encounters, in which, more often than not, key diegetic disclosures or puzzles are divulged or set into motion. Without doubt they constitute some of the most infamous Lynchian moments, as indicated by their popularity on websites such as YouTube as well as their notoriety in popular culture.

What appears to take place at or during Lynch's parties recalls the Anglo-Norman and French roots of the word, *pertie* and *partie*. These roots connote the division, abstraction and specificity associated with the noun form, defined by the *OED* as 'part of a larger unit, part of the body, part of a larger space, side, faction, a group of people, territory, country […] A part, portion, side […] A division of a whole.' A party, in this sense, draws on the contemporary and common political use of the term – as in 'party politics' – while referring to a more formal method of naming a group of people banded together for one reason or another – a hunting party, a dinner party of five, the Donner Party. Since it shares its etymology with the noun, the verb 'to party', according to the *OED*, also evokes separation from the whole and an allegiance to a group: 'to side with, to take the part of, to take sides, to form a party' – the very parting required, in other words, by the demands of a party. Its French roots also notably draw a homophonic link with the past participle of the verb *partir* (to leave), *parti.*[31] To put it bluntly, the party parts, *est parti*. A portion gathers together after separating from the whole for reasons related to some kind of common ground among the party members. Party implies the impermanence and residues of parting, of something (a former group or cause, perhaps) left behind, of one party for another, of parts. It is not until around 1920 that the colloquial, specifically North American use of the intransitive term 'to party' was associated with general entertainment, amusement and having a good time.

Although most characters in Lynch's films tend to busy themselves with the common activities of 'partying' during their time at parties – drinking, laughing, swearing, smoking, dancing and telling stories – what strikes one about Lynch's parties is that many of his characters experience these events through their place *outside* the party. Lynch's parties feature internal parts. For these characters, parties are experiences of non-belonging and being apart (as well as a part); parties are occasions during which they witness their own departure or distance from the partying world of the party. Lynch's parties are therefore never wholes; they are impossible parties (in the accumulated, unified, communal sense of the term), riven by partitions. Put differently, there are *only* parties at Lynch's parties, only divisions of clumped together parts and departures. Lynch's parties lay bare the general law, economy or physics at the root of his cinema: the reciprocity of formation and dispersal.

In a filmed interview that accompanied the premiere of 'Crazy Clown Time', *Vice* journalist Eddy Moretti elaborated on the apparent disparity between the extremity and destruction of Lynch's infamous party scenes and the more popular function of partying as a method of what the former called 'stress relief'. Upon hearing Moretti's characterization of parties as catharsis, Lynch swiftly interrupted his interviewer with the following:

> *They're [parties] not about relieving stress! Nobody says, 'let's have a party so we can relieve some stress'. [They say] 'let's have a party so we can have some fun'. And fun is like everything; it's a relative thing. What's fun for one may not be fun for another.*[32]

Lynch's surprisingly pointed corrective describes fun as a kind of party line. As the party's impetus, fun is not necessarily purgative or cathartic, and in Lynch's cinema, fun is precisely what stresses and fractures the partygoers between those who are experiencing it and those who are not, between those on the inside and those on the outside of the party. The exclusion operating within Lynch's version of fun is, like the word party, consistent with the term's historical meaning as it is described in the *OED*, 'to cheat, hoax […] to cajole'. Obviously this take on fun is closer in meaning to the expression 'to be made fun of' than it is to any sense of collective happiness, enjoyment or 'stress relief'. One certainly can (and many do) take pleasure in 'making fun' of another or others. These acts are frequently innocent and harmless, with the object of mirth often having a laugh at their own expense. 'Making fun' can surely be 'funny' in the sense of 'affording fun, mirth-producing, comical, facetious', as the *OED* has it. But what also remains undeniable is that fun – at least as it is defined and portrayed by Lynch – is conditioned by a type of exclusion, victimhood and/or violence. Fun allows one to be 'funny' in its colloquial

meaning of ‘curious, queer, odd, strange’, and in so doing signals agency or dominance over the position of another who is located outside the fun that creates a party. Fun partitions and makes parts through the positions of those inside, those parties ‘*in* on the joke’. As with ‘party’, ‘fun’ thus posits a certain spatiality and localization of those inside and outside; fun adjudicates the position and ranking of those at a particular party.

In Lynch’s films, fun-deprived characters – those who are left looking in at others ‘hav[ing] some fun’ – relay the specificity of his parties. Echoing the Lynchian take on oppositionality, fun often irreconcilably separates attendees from their respective parties; fun happens only over there, always elsewhere. For Lynch fun is not necessarily had at the expense of the fun-deprived or dependent on making fun of another; directly ‘laughing at’ someone is not a prerequisite. On the contrary, fun occurs in Lynch’s parties when a particular character demonstrates his or her detachment from it. This experience of fun at a remove discloses an insurmountable distance between inside and outside, rendering any negotiation or reconciliation between sides impossible; it is here, at the party and among the exclusions of fun, that one bears witness to Lynch’s ‘power of both’, a party made possible by fun, a ‘middle ground’ of (funny) parts.

The experience of fun at Lynch’s parties is made visible by the faces of speechless outsiders who, as party attendees, serve as guides, portals or spectators to sometimes hideous, twisted and dreamlike forms and folds of amusement. These characters are strangers at these gatherings, brought there by force, coincidence or otherwise unwittingly. Classical shot/reverse-shot structure and extreme closeup framing, frequently cutting from long shots of the party’s fun back to the outsider’s face and reaction, reflect intraparty lines and Lynch’s topographies of fun. For Gilles Deleuze, this variety of closeup displays the face’s more static ‘reflecting surface’, one of its ‘two poles’ (the other is characterized by what he calls ‘intensive micro-movements’ or the more explosive gestures of paroxysm).[33] Deleuze says that the face’s reflective pole signals the interval, gap or in-between that follows the subject’s perception of stimuli and precedes their reaction to it. This creates, according to Deleuze, a moment in a film that ‘tear[s] the image away from spatio-temporal co-ordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed’.[34] Following Deleuze’s account of the reflective face, the impact of Lynch’s closeups at his parties disrupts the scene’s proper place within the diegesis – it is as if the film came to a standstill through the face and its witnessing of fun, as if through the party a part separated itself from the very body of the film, as a film or singular moment within the film proper, a film inside *and* outside of the larger work, ‘an interstitial place without [proper] place’. Deleuze argues that this displacement is unquantifiable because the face in this state – the face that reflects – transmits only the quality of the character’s ‘processing’. Between perception and before an intended action, the face that beholds Lynch’s parties is completely consumed *in the process* of fun. For Richard Rushton, the

reflective face is distinguished by its association with what Deleuze calls ‘wonder’, a word that in the latter’s *Difference and Repetition* corresponds to a ‘fundamental *encounter*’ with someone or something prior to her/his/its identification, recognition and assimilation.[35] The reflective face is therefore trapped or immobilized in the act of registering someone or something foreign; it is caught in the moment prior to judgment and making sense, familiarization and assimilation. Seized in this suspension or neutralization, the face appears vulnerable and undone; the reflective face is exposed by its temporary inability to diagnose and master what it encounters.

Lynch’s fun-deprived are parties of one, parties within parties; their faces reflect the partitions, parts and unassimilable portions that take or have their proper place at parties. These characters are present, but at a distance from fun. They are outside-in and inside-out, looking within from without, in wonder, enraptured, set adrift: from the revelers who drunkenly ascend into John Merrick’s quarters and force him to partake in their fun (kissing, drinking and dancing) in *Elephant Man*, to Jeffrey Beaumount’s descent into the kitsch interior of Ben’s (Dean Stockwell) place in *Blue Velvet* and the latter’s unforgettable performance of Roy Orbison’s ‘Candy Colored Clown’; from Sailor and Lula (Nicholas Cage and Laura Dern) in *Wild at Heart* (1990) and their introduction to the inhabitants of Big Tuna, including the supposed rocket scientist and his invisible dog, the corpulent porno-shoot or strip-show happening just next door, and the uber-villain Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe) with his rotting gums, to Laura Palmer’s best friend Donna Hayward (Moria Kell), and the access she provides into Laura’s secret world of prostitution, drug use and exhibitionism in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*. Unlike Lynch’s other fun-deprived characters, Donna takes her exclusion from Laura’s world as a challenge to prove her worth to her friend as somebody ‘fun’. As Donna finally surrenders to and partakes in the drunken and drugged ‘fun’ at the Pink Room, Laura’s position within the party becomes compromised as she assumes the role of an observer looking in. This reversal shows that, for Lynch, the occurrence of fun depends on a certain exclusion from it; the limit-condition of fun cannot be grasped from within. In *Lost Highway* Fred Madison meets the grinning Mystery Man (Robert Blake) at a house party. Not only does this encounter further solidify Fred’s solitude at the party, it also shows him to be homeless – effectively dispossessed by his possessions. The Mystery Man’s phone call puts him simultaneously at the party with Fred *and* in Fred’s home (here and there, party and *parti*), a place where he claims to have been invited as a welcomed guest. This uncanniness estranges Fred from what appears to be his ‘property’ (such as his home and his wife) and his proper self; he is a host who/that is shown to be more than one, and thus no longer anyone. In *Mulholland Drive* Diane’s desire to win back Camilla (Laura Harring) is shattered at a dinner-party, where we learn that she has always lived in Camilla’s shadow; the latter’s successful rise within Hollywood has mirrored Diane’s drift into mediocrity. To make matters more unbearable, the party, unbeknownst to Diane, is being held to

announce Camilla’s engagement. Dreams of reconciliation transform into machinations of revenge (figures 9–11).

Figs 9–11





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Parties facing fun: Kyle MacLachlan as Jeffrey Beaumont in *Blue Velvet* (1986), Sheryl

Lee as Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992) and Naomi Watts as Diane Selwyn in *Mulholland Drive* (2001).

Beyond the many differences between feature-length films and music videos, the events and fun of 'Crazy Clown Time' are distinguished from the patterns of Lynch's other parties by their ostensible lack of an identified and identifiable outsider. There is no visible witness of fun at a distance, no definable partition other than the backyard walls. From this viewpoint everything in this world is inside fun, every partygoer is in on the joke, all are 'laughing-with', engulfed in the sheer totality of fun. Lynch himself seems to support this reading when he tells Moretti that 'for this bunch, this is what they call fun'.[36] Despite Lynch's undecidable place within the diegesis as both creator and witness/participant, the only apparent outsider at this party seems to be the viewer. She seems to be the only one who remains at a distance and in a place from which judgments of 'Crazy Clown Time' can be passed; she is the one who is brought to, or arrives at, this party and witnesses its fun. Beckoned by Lynch's authorial signature, the viewers of 'Crazy Clown Time' are extras in the scene; they are unnamed, unheard and unseen characters, perhaps disregarded or unaccepted onlookers who remain on the other side of the fun threshold. Observing from such a remove that they are rendered invisible, viewers are left looking in on a 'bunch' that calls this, whatever it is, 'fun'.

A short YouTube tube clip posted by Sunday Best Recordings alludes to the possibility of another reading. In 'behind-the-scenes' style, the video features Lynch directing 'Crazy Clown Time' and interacting with his actors. At one point in the video he yells at the cast: 'This is *not* a fun night! All of you are filled with a kind of crazy anger. *You're trying to have fun* … It's like you're crazy!'[37] Clearly these words complicate any assumptions of 'Crazy Clown Time' as pure celebratory fun, but remain consistent with Lynch's steadfast avoidance of assigning one true meaning to any of his works. In this case the characters are pushing against the limits of fun and their party lines; they are attempting to get inside another party besides their own, another inaccessible realm of fun. Located somewhere between total fun and its complete absence, the characters of 'Crazy Clown Time' are agitated by the promise of another party *over there*. 'Filled with a kind of crazy anger', and thus a kind of fun-madness or fever, they are unable or unwilling to escape the confines of the backyard and the 'fun' that it encloses as well as prohibits. They cannot turn this party into fun. And yet their fun, or the absence of it, corresponds to all of Lynch's parties; 'Crazy Clown Time' is a party where everything dissolves, fissures and disunites. Each and every quest for fun, each proper name and action, is at once motivated and restrained by some monstrous party elsewhere or to come, an event that harbours the final, however impossible, fulfilment of fun.

Perhaps this is what this group calls fun. Perhaps the 'crazy anger' produced by the

various attempts ‘to have fun’ provides a certain pleasure for Petey, Sally, Buddy and Susie. The agitation wrought by the inability to have conventional fun becomes perversely delightful (‘Nobody says, “let’s have a party so we can relieve some stress”’); perhaps the final arrival of fun signals its end. In other words, fun here occurs precisely through the sublimity of its absence. This party of Lynch’s is an event where nobody has fun; it is oppressive, stressful and disturbingly traditional– it is crazy.

Is ‘Crazy Clown Time’ really no fun? Or is the viewer taking a cruel pleasure in watching Lynch’s characters suffer in their attempts to party? Are the partygoers reveling in their own powerlessness and distress like the sadomasochists that they seem to be? Just who or what is *not* having fun in the perverted sense of the word?

In his interview with Lynch, Moretti asks if the clown in ‘Crazy Clown Time’ relates to a chapter from *Catching the Big Fish*, ‘The suffocating rubber clown suit’. The chapter’s title, as Lynch points out in the book, serves as a metaphor for the typical array of negative emotions – anxiety, depression, anger – that inhibit one’s pursuit of tranquility, happiness and creativity. ‘It’s *suffocating* and that rubber *stinks*’, Lynch writes of the suit, which he later adds can be ‘dissolved’ through ‘meditating and diving within’.[38] Rather than directly responding to Moretti with a simple yes or no, Lynch redirects the question to the issues surrounding the clown trope. He notes that ‘clowns were meant to really make kids happy, and there’s, you know, a feeling to a lot of clowns – circus clowns – that actually produces fear in the kids, or some kind of anxiety’.[39] While Lynch’s comments overlook the long tradition of clowns as adult mischief-makers who were never totally removed from the forces of darkness, his response to Moretti hijacks or deflects another request for decoding into a discourse on or about meaning and intention.[40]

My purpose here is not to chide Lynch for his mischaracterization of the history of clowns. Instead it is to indicate that, even when he is factually wrong, he challenges his readers, viewers and/or listeners to ask what is not, at least partly, ‘funny’ in the world. Lynch’s project and discourse always return to the same questions. Who or what is immune to internal difference? Who or what is not, in the end, ‘curious, queer, odd, [or] strange’? Perhaps Lynch’s cinema, of which ‘Crazy Clown Time’ is certainly a *part*, does little else than utter these questions through its silences and wordless gaps. Taciturnity, deferral, brevity and the refusal to produce quick and easy answers in a world that increasingly demands or expects them sets into motion funny rhythms in that very same world. Lynch has long noticed that these rhythms are already there, that they comprise what one names ‘the world’. In its funniness, this world music often passes by unheard; it is at once of the world and otherworldly. Rhythms are there, always more than one: a sound, a scream, variations of silence, words, an ear, burrows, holes.

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